

## Hepatitis C

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### *What is hepatitis C?*

Hepatitis C is a viral infection of the liver caused by the hepatitis C virus. Hepatitis means inflammation of the liver. If the liver is not working properly, it can cause serious illness. There are other viruses that cause inflammation of the liver including hepatitis A, B, D and E.

### *What are the symptoms?*

Most people have no symptoms at all when they are first infected with hepatitis C.

If there are symptoms, they usually develop within two weeks to six months of exposure to the virus and can include:

- not feeling hungry/loss of appetite
- nausea or vomiting
- tiredness or fatigue
- abdominal pain
- yellowing of the skin and eyes (jaundice)
- dark urine

These initial symptoms usually only last a few weeks.

### *How long does the infection last?*

Hepatitis C can be acute or chronic. A small number of people with hepatitis C infection have an acute illness and will clear the virus naturally within the first six months without treatment. These people are no longer infectious and cannot pass the virus on to others.

However, most people with hepatitis C will develop a chronic (long-term) infection and need treatment to clear the virus. Symptoms of chronic hepatitis C include:

- tiredness or fatigue
- increased moodiness and depression
- abdominal pain
- dry/itchy skin and eyes
- “brain fog” and generally feeling unwell

Without treatment, chronic hepatitis C can be a lifelong condition and may result in permanent liver damage or liver cancer. People with chronic hepatitis C usually appear well for many years but may develop symptoms as their liver damage progresses.

People can become reinfected after treatment or after clearing the virus naturally.

## ***How is it diagnosed?***

Hepatitis C infection can be diagnosed from blood tests which are available from your doctor. It may take a few weeks from the time of exposure before the test can determine whether you have the infection.

## ***How is hepatitis C transmitted?***

Hepatitis C is spread through blood-to-blood contact when blood from a person with hepatitis C enters another person's bloodstream. It only takes a very small amount of infected blood that may not be visible to the naked eye to pass the virus on.

Hepatitis C virus is most commonly passed on in Australia through sharing equipment used to inject drugs, including needles, syringes, spoons and tourniquets.

The virus may also be passed on by:

- unsterile tattooing or body piercing (including DIY)
- needle-stick injury or blood splash e.g., in the health care setting
- sharing personal items which have blood on them such as toothbrushes or razors
- direct contact with blood on an open wound or cut
- from mother to baby during pregnancy or at the time of birth

Hepatitis C is rarely transmitted through sexual contact. However, it may be passed on during sex without a condom, particularly in people living with HIV infection.

Breastfeeding is safe. However, if nipples are cracked or bleeding, cease breastfeeding until they have healed.

Hepatitis C cannot be transmitted by saliva, coughing, sneezing, casual contact like hugging, or sharing food.

## ***Who is at risk?***

Those most at risk of hepatitis C infection include:

- people who share unsterile needles, syringes, or other injecting equipment
- people who inject drugs, or have injected drugs in the past
- people who are exposed to non-sterile tattooing, piercing or acupuncture equipment
- people who have been in prison
- people who were born in, or have received a blood/tissue donation or undergone a medical procedure in countries with a high prevalence of hepatitis C
- people who have received a blood/tissue donation in Australia prior to February 1990

Hepatitis C virus testing of blood donations was introduced by Australian blood banks in February 1990. The risk of acquiring hepatitis C through blood transfusions in Australia is now extremely low.

## ***How can hepatitis C be prevented?***

There is no vaccine for hepatitis C. The only way to prevent acquiring hepatitis C is to avoid exposure to infected blood.

Hepatitis C can be prevented by:

- never sharing injecting equipment
- only using sterile injecting equipment once and dispose of it safely after use
- ensuring that practitioners performing tattoos, piercing and acupuncture use sterile equipment and are licensed
- not sharing razors, toothbrushes or other personal items which can transfer blood
- always wearing gloves and protective clothing when dealing with blood or body fluids to ensure that blood does not come in contact with the skin
- always using condoms with new or casual sexual partners ,or for sex that might involve blood-to-blood contact

## ***How is hepatitis C treated?***

There are new anti-viral medications available to people living with chronic hepatitis C with a Medicare card. The new medications are more effective, easier to take, and have fewer side-effects than the older medications. The Australian Government has listed these new medicines on the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme to make them accessible and affordable to people with hepatitis C. The new medications result in a cure for 90-95% of people.

If you have been diagnosed with hepatitis C you should:

- have a liver health assessment and discuss treatment options with your doctor as soon as possible
- have regular medical/specialist follow up appointments
- limit or avoid alcohol and maintain a healthy lifestyle
- consider getting vaccinated against hepatitis A and hepatitis B to minimise damage to the liver and
- contact Hepatitis ACT for further information and support on (02) 6230 6344 or go to <https://hepatitisact.com.au/>

## Need more information?

For more information about hepatitis C contact your doctor, Hepatitis ACT or call the Health Protection Service, Communicable Disease Control Information Line during business hours on **(02) 5124 9213**.

**Communicable Disease Control Section at Health Protection Service** is responsible for the investigation and surveillance of notifiable or infectious conditions in the ACT in order to control or prevent their spread in the community. This includes the promotion of immunisation, education and other strategies that help to limit the spread of diseases.

Hepatitis C is a notifiable disease.

## Acknowledgement

Heymann DL. *Control of Communicable Diseases Manual*. 20th edn. Washington: American Public Health Association, USA; 2015.

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